



## Rewarding Landowners for Their Stewardship Efforts

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Agricultural landowners here in the Hondo watershed who are good stewards of the land may soon receive long-deserved recognition and financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The encouragement and the incentives are both part of the new Conservation Security Program (CSP), administered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

As a third-generation South Dakota rancher and farmer, I grew up among people who worked hard both to produce a profit and to be good stewards of the land. But I have also seen how much our society has come to expect from our landowners.

We expect them to prevent soil erosion and the runoff of pesticides and fertilizers, so our waters will remain clean; to control animal odors, so our air stays fresh; to provide habitat for wildlife, birds, and fish, so we can enjoy nature; and even to keep their land undeveloped, so we can drive through natural surroundings near our cities.

Not only have we come to expect all these benefits, but – until now – we have made our farmers and ranchers pay too much of the cost. CSP will change all that for the most conservation-minded landowners in the Hondo watershed. They will be among the first producers in the nation to benefit from this new USDA program.

CSP is part of the Bush Administration's unprecedented investment in conservation, including a proposal to spend \$3.9 billion on USDA conservation programs in 2005. This investment will have significant and long-lasting environmental benefits.

The change to a more balanced approach to conservation is going full speed as the Administration implements the 2002 Farm Bill. Conservation programs have evolved to help farmers voluntarily provide the environmental benefits our nation needs.

Landowners who once had to bear the full cost for environmental improvement projects can now apply for cost-share assistance through programs like the Environmental Quality

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Incentives Program (EQIP). Federal programs like the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), combined with other state and local programs, have restored millions of acres of wetlands, riparian areas and wildlife habitat throughout the country.

CSP is the next step. It is a new approach to conservation on America's working agricultural lands. Most kinds of agricultural land – cropland, orchards, vineyards, pasture and range – can qualify for CSP. That's good news everywhere, not just in certain parts of the country.

CSP will motivate producers to be better stewards. Only producers with a proven record of stewardship will qualify, but other producers can use other conservation programs to become eligible in future years.

CSP is designed to be the most accountable conservation program ever. It will keep track of environmental results in a way that will show producers, Congress and taxpayers what benefits participating farmers and ranchers are actually producing.

CSP will improve the long-term profitability of farms and ranches. The conservation benefits gained through CSP will help make farms and ranches more sustainable, while improving our natural resources for all Americans. That's good news for agriculture, agribusiness and America's rural economies.

Producers in the Hondo watershed are fortunate to be among the first to be eligible for CSP, but the program will spread to watershed throughout the country over the next few years. Soon every producer who meets the standards will have a chance to participate.

CSP will not only become a premier program for environmental stewardship, but it will serve as the new standard of excellence in conservation, producing benefits for all Americans.

Producers in the [Hondo watershed](#) have until July 30 to apply for CSP. Information is available on the NRCS web site at [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov) or from local NRCS offices.

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